Corpse eating and an illicit cult

Lambert Marani

The child’s body was buried. But what I found curious was that the grave was not as deep as usual. Three days later, my curiosity was answered. These inland people dug up the grave again, retrieved the body, cut it up and then brought it into the forest. In the woods they cooked some of the flesh and ate it with leaves. Other flesh was wrapped with goraka (ginger root), bark and leaves, then discarded in another village.

Apparently this was a ritual which, according to local beliefs, could conjure a suangi (evil ghost). The intention of dumping the remaining pieces of the corpse in the other village was to get the suangi to kill the people of that village. This incident took place in kampung Boven-Tor, in Sarmi sub-division. As head of the district, I was angered to see all this. It was an act against God. I told the police to arrest those people, then I beat them with a rattan cane until the cane fell apart.

I then sent a single side band radio message to the HPB of Sarmi, Eduard van Voskuylen, whereupon he sent two Johnson motorboats and took the people to Sarmi to be put on trial. Those who received light sentences stayed in Sarmi; those who received heavy sentences were brought to Hollandia to serve their time there.

That was one of the interesting experiences I had while serving as a civil servant in the Papuan hinterlands after graduating from OSIBA. Another interesting experience was when I encountered a community that followed the kasiep sect, an illicit cult from Ormu that later spread to Genyem, Nimboran and Unurum. In this cult they sometimes swapped wives with each other. At the time I was serving as the district head of Unurum.

One morning around five, the whole village was dead quiet. I wondered what was going on. Why was the village so quiet? Where were the villagers? Another morning, because my house was by the roadside,
I heard the voices of people walking. ‘Where were they going?’ I wondered. I became curious to find out more.

The next morning I stood guard again, and when I heard the voices I looked out and saw men and women walking in a certain direction. I followed them. It turned out they were going somewhere and swapping wives with one another. I then went to see the ondopafi (traditional leader) and asked him for an explanation.

As an important person in the village, the ondopafi would be sure to know what it was about. The ondopafi – who was handicapped, so that when he walked he had to be supported by both arms – then told me everything. To express my thanks I later gave him some contact goods – such as machetes, axes, trousers, cloth, and blankets. These materials had indeed been provided by the government to the administrators to facilitate relations with the communities in the interior.

After that I composed a letter and sent a messenger to bring it to the HPB in Genyem. I told the messenger: ‘Wait until the police from Base G arrive in Genyem, only then will you leave to come here together’. The police (mobile brigade) came and they were all brought to Genyem. Those who received heavy sentences were then brought to Hollandia, while the ones with light sentences stayed in Genyem.

The followers of the kasiep sect did not worship the gods or praise the Lord. Nor did they sing and beat drums or gongs to worship God. They stole into houses quietly because they had evil intentions. The sect could enter and flourish in the interior because the people of the interior imitated their relatives who lived on the coast. When people from Genyem went to see family members who lived in Hollandia, or people from Ormu met family members in Sentani, they heard or were told about the sect. On returning home to their villages in the interior they did it there. These things were forbidden by the government because they were crimes. But the good habits of the community were still permitted.

HAPPY TO BE A CIVIL SERVANT

My decision to become a bestuursambtenaar (employee of the civil service) was based on none other than my desire to know the cultures and ways of life of the Papuan nation, both on the coasts and in the mountains